

# Writing a UCAS Academic Reference

This information is designed to provide advice for those staff in schools and colleges who have the responsibility to write the UCAS Academic References for applicants. It provides general information and is not intended to be a comprehensive document. It is important to note that different universities apply different criteria for assessing applications and you should ensure that you and your students are aware of any particular requirements for courses and universities that they are applying to. We hope, however, that this document will help you address some of the issues in writing an appropriate reference for entry to higher education.



## What is a UCAS Academic Reference?

A student's UCAS Academic Reference is designed to provide universities and colleges with an informed and academic assessment of the applicant's suitability for their chosen course.

## The importance of the UCAS Academic Reference

The UCAS Academic Reference is important for a number of reasons:

- the UCAS Academic Reference is one tool used by universities and colleges to help determine whether to offer a student a conditional or unconditional university place
- it is the only part of the application that the applicants do not write themselves. As you know your students and universities and colleges don't, universities and colleges rely on it to demonstrate the real potential of the student
- it will be read and may be scored to assess whether the applicant has the necessary skills and academic ability to study the stated course

## What are universities looking for?

UCAS states that Universities are looking for an informed and academic assessment of:

- their academic performance in their post-16 education
- their potential for academic success in higher education
- why their chosen course is suited to them
- any personal qualities which will benefit them at university, such as skills, aptitude, enthusiasm
- what they can bring to the university, such as extra-curricular activities and interests

## The University of Manchester perspective

At The University of Manchester we are looking for the UCAS Academic Reference to be written by a member of staff who knows the candidate and his/her performance, and places the candidate and their actual/predicted results in context. It should support the student's personal statement and give an honest, fair and relevant assessment of the candidate's potential to succeed at a higher level in the chosen subjects.

"The UCAS Academic Reference plays a very important role in our decision making process. We use it to assess not only the student's current achievements but also their future potential. We receive more applications than we have places and our aim is to make offers to those applicants who are best suited to studying at Manchester. This is a difficult and complex judgement which involves assessing which students best meet our selection criteria, and which students have the potential to benefit most from their chosen course, and to contribute both to the Academic School and the wider University. The UCAS Academic Reference, by giving us a strong sense of the individual student, plays an important part in helping us make that judgement."

**Dr Michael Sanders**  
Director for Admissions and Recruitment  
& Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature,  
School of Arts, Languages and Cultures





## The Process

This will be different at different schools, but we suggest ...

- **Students** could be invited to provide information about themselves (pro forma and/or discussion) and to compile grade predictions.
- **Subject teachers** provide specific comments and predicted grades.
- **Personal tutor** may provide a statement on personal qualities and assemble the reference, editing it to include an introduction and conclusion ensuring consistency and that it 'reads well'.
- Completed references should then be added to the online application form, before final checking and submission by the senior authorised UCAS contact.



## Predicted Grades

Each pending qualification that the applicant has entered on their application will be listed in the reference section.

Predicted grades should be clear and unambiguous, and need to consider:

- Do they match the entrance requirements of the courses chosen?
- Are they consistent with the past academic performance of the student?

If 'No' to any of the above, then you need to provide an explanation in the reference.

It is helpful if referees are honest and clear about particular subjects students are having difficulty with. If a low predicted grade is accompanied by a glowing reference it can be difficult to see the relationship between the two. Therefore it is useful if referees are able to say in the reference why a student is achieving this grade, whether a higher grade is within their grasp and whether they have the potential and/or motivation to reach this higher grade. This can help universities and colleges take into account a student's potential as well as their previous performance.

## How to write and structure the reference

The structure of the UCAS reference is not set in stone and will differ from school to school and candidate to candidate, but should include:

- Background information on the applicant and the school
- Details relating to extra-curricular activities and candidate's personality
- Subject by subject reports
  - Details from subject teacher
  - Most relevant or best first
- Extra Curricular activities/Candidates personality
- Suitability for the course and University

## Background information on the applicant and the school

It can be useful to include brief details about the applicant and the school. Information about the school/college could include:

- Size and type of school/college
- Number of students in student's year group and/or class sizes, and the proportion typically progressing to HE
- Typical number and patterns of qualifications taken by students
- Information about school policy such as number of A 'levels taken, are students able to take 4 AS levels in Year 12?
- Contextual information about the catchment

If the student's own situation is different to the typical school policy, it is helpful to give details of this.

If you choose to enter details about the school/college, please ensure that they are succinct, as the reference should focus mainly on the applicant rather than the school/college.

Things to mention when giving background information on the applicant and the school could include:

- Additional Support Needs
- English as a Second Language
- 16-19 bursary fund
- First generation to Higher Education
- Living in Local Authority Care
- Complex family situation
- Carer or affected by the disability/death of a close family member
- Asylum-seeker/residency issues
- Bullying

These should not be mentioned in the personal statement by the applicant.

It is important to note that you should not give information about an applicant's health or disability without their agreement.

Students are asked to state any disabilities or special needs in a separate part of the application. Students are not obliged to disclose such information on their application, however, early disclosure gives the universities and colleges more time to prepare and arrange the support that a student may need. Some referees may wish to mention the student's learning difference or disability in an academic context, such as how they currently cope at school or college.

**Academic performance post-16 – subject by subject reports.**

The most important part of the reference is your assessment of the applicant's suitability for the higher education courses they have chosen.

Most universities find it useful to have information and details from subject teachers about the applicant. Ideally your reference should include subject by subject reports and they should be listed with the most relevant or best achieving subject first.

**We recommend that you consider the following points:**

- Student's academic performance in their post-16 education – current/past achievements in the subject(s)
- Potential for academic success – profile of academic and personal qualities and skills
- Suitability of chosen course/subject area
- What they can bring to the university
- Evaluation compared to other students
- Individual circumstances (if not mentioned elsewhere)
- Explanation of qualifications

**Extra Curricular activities, the candidate's personality and suitability for the course and University.**

The reference should include a summary of the student's extra curricular activities, the candidate's personality and suitability for the course and university. Many courses provide details of the selection criteria and attributes they are looking for in their prospectuses, websites or entry profiles. This may be helpful starting point if you are constructing a reference for a course that you have little prior experience in recommending an applicant for. For example, if they are applying for a demanding course such as Medicine, will they be able to cope with the pressure?

**Areas that should be covered include:**

- Discussion of student's personal qualities
  - Maturity, commitment, enthusiasm
  - Transferable skills where not mentioned above such as time management, organisation etc.
- Extra curricular activities and roles of responsibility
- Suitability for the course and university
  - Emphasise particular experiences or skills relevant to the course

# Final thoughts ...

Be realistic and supportive

You must be fair and accurate – factually correct

Avoid too much overlap with the personal statement – reference should complement it

Opinions passed must be justifiable

Take account of all the student's choices

The length of reference – 4000 character word limit or 47 lines (whichever is shorter)

Remember the UCAS form is invisible of choice  
(no reference should be made to individual universities)

References are no longer confidential – be open with students and their parents

If written early in the UCAS cycle, invite the university to contact you later for more details  
(particularly for Access to HE Students)

Tailored to the individual

Link the reference to the student's subject choice

## Where to find out more:

**The University of Manchester** For information on how your students can apply, the courses offered and open day dates [www.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.manchester.ac.uk)

**The University of Manchester – Teacher and Adviser Information** For information on the activities and resources available for teachers and advisers [www.manchester.ac.uk/connect/teachers](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/connect/teachers)

**UMASS** University of Manchester Aspiring Students' Society for application advice and glossary of terms [www.umass.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.umass.manchester.ac.uk)